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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000075

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: SOUTHERN SERBS TENSE, NORTHERNERS DEFIANT  
AS INDEPENDENCE NEARS

Classified By: COM Tina S. Kaidanow for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Tension remains high among Kosovo Serbs in the southern enclaves during the lead-up to independence, despite efforts by both Kosovo authorities and KFOR to reassure them regarding security. In the north, hardline leaders Marko Jaksic and Milan Ivanovic are continuing their virulent rhetorical campaign against independence, while a small explosion near the ICO office in north Mitrovica on February 14 indicates that the anti-EU campaign of the local Serb leadership will continue and intensify. Jaksic also announced protests in Serb areas across Kosovo on February 18th, and we anticipate a large number of Serbian politicians, likely including Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica, will arrive in Kosovo on the day of independence to underscore the political point that "Kosovo remains part of Serbia." From the ground, Belgrade appears to be giving the northern hardliners considerable leeway and few operational limits, a vacuum that could add to tensions if Serbs push the boundaries of resistance too far. However, KFOR and UNMIK police are prepared for all eventualities, and a few early problems have been handled successfully in Mitrovica with the assistance of the ethnic Albanian leadership there. End Summary.

Serbs Uneasy...

¶2. (C) As Kosovo's declaration of independence nears, tension is high among Kosovo Serbs, especially in the southern enclaves. Every one of the southern Kosovo Serb contacts with whom we have spoken in recent days, including Independent Liberal Party (SLS) leader Slobodan Petrovic and Father Sava Janjic of Viskoki Decani monastery, have told us that Kosovo Serbs are afraid of upcoming events. Bojan Stojanovic, SLS' caucus head in the Kosovo Assembly, told us February 15 that Kosovo Serbs are particularly fearful of a "repeat of March 2004." While many Serbs have noticed the augmented presence of KFOR, UNMIK police, and the Kosovo Police Service (KPS), even this can cause heightened anxiety; Janjic reported February 15 that Serbs in Klina were unnerved at seeing additional KFOR soldiers, surmising that trouble was expected.

...Although Outreach is Effective

13. (C) Despite this, there are signs indicating that the ongoing campaign by Kosovo authorities, KFOR, and the KPS to reassure Kosovo Serbs is having some effect. UNHCR Bashir Khan, whose office covers the western Serb enclaves in the municipalities of Klina, Peja/Pec, and Istok/Istog, told us February 12 that the KPS has been making successful efforts for the past few months to reassure Serbs. Likewise, in Gracanica (near Pristina), Municipal Returns Officer Predrag Vasic told us February 13 that KFOR and KPS are conducting a widespread outreach campaign which has served to reassure nervous locals. Overall, the message of restraint in independence celebrations has been effectively spread among Kosovo's Albanian population, and the resulting calm has had some residual impact in Serb communities. Recent statements by Belgrade authorities urging Serbs to stay in Kosovo also appear to have impact, and we have not heard any reports of families readying to leave, though this will be subject to the security environment in the days following independence.

#### Belgrade Appears to Maintain a Purposeful Distance from Northern Serb Actions

14. (C) Meanwhile, northern Serb hardliners continue their strident rhetorical campaign against independence and against the new EU missions. At a February 15 meeting of the hard-line Association of Serb Municipalities and Settlements (ASMS), ASMS leader Marko Jaksic announced that the new EU mission to Kosovo would be considered an "occupying force," while media reports quoted Serb National Council leader Milan Ivanovic as saying that roadblocks in northern Kosovo would prevent movement or deployment of a new EU mission and that access to the ICO building in northern Mitrovica would be blocked. He also announced a "civil disobedience" movement

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which would include a public "shunning" of EU representatives (no service in restaurants, etc.). Late on the evening of February 14, an explosion took place at a house close to the ICO offices in Mitrovica. At the time of this writing, we have heard differing reports about the explosion itself, but our sources, including UNMIK-P chief for northern Kosovo Randall Darty, agree that the target of the blast was likely the ICO office. Police and KFOR patrols around the area have been beefed up as a result.

15. (C) Though the ASMS had earlier announced its intention to transform itself into a new parallel Kosovo Serb Assembly, the decision to do this was apparently deferred until after Kosovo's independence declaration. At the ASMS's February 15 meeting, Jaksic reportedly said that this decision "will be taken in accordance with the Serbian government." Belgrade may have weighed in and instructed the northern leadership to hold off, but in general we have sensed a "hands off" approach from Belgrade with regard to northern Serb activities and plans, possibly to provide plausible deniability if events turn violent. The lack of "redlines" or guidance from Belgrade could prove problematic if northern Serbs choose to push the envelope or encourage public anger against the international community in the north.

#### Protests and Visits Planned

16. (C) Belgrade has, however, been active in encouraging Serbs throughout Kosovo to express their outrage over independence via peaceful demonstrations, with anti-independence rallies announced for the Serb-majority areas of Mitrovica, Strpce, Ranilug, and Gracanica on Monday, February 18th. To underscore the point further that "Kosovo remains part of Serbia," we understand that a large (and growing) group of Serbian politicians -- likely including Serbian PM Kostunica -- plans to visit Kosovo on independence day itself. According to information provided by UNMIK on February 15, Minister for Kosovo Slobodan Samardzic, Minister of Infrastructure Velimir Ilic, and Minister of Energy Aleksandar Popovic will be part of this visit. In addition,

Father Sava Janjic told us that Minister of Religion Naumov will visit Decani monastery on the 17th. A host of parliamentarians will reportedly accompany this group of ministers, mostly from Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) party and its partner New Serbia (NS).

Comment: Holding Steady

17. (C) We continue to believe that Kosovo Serbs will largely stay in place after independence, despite their fears. Government efforts to keep celebrations safe and reassure Serbs appear to be effective, although no one can preclude potential acts of violence on either side. KFOR, UNMIK police and KPS have made extensive plans and are ready for most eventualities; an early and reassuring signal that they can handle problems came February 15 in Mitrovica when ethnic Albanian flags were placed prominently near the bridge and were quickly and effectively removed in cooperation with local Albanian authorities, including the mayor. We will continue to report on developments and work to ensure full security on the ground in the days ahead. End Comment.  
KAIDANOW